

Features

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Bringing Joy to Families

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It was late September and Tropical Storm Ophelia's remnants kept the day drizzly and damp when I visited Colonial Gardens in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, a suburb of Philadelphia.

Since it was Yom Kippur, Colonial Gardens had families with small children visiting their Pumpkinland on their day off from school. Pumpkinland at Colonial Gardens is an indoor play area with different rooms decorated with fall themes.

The retailer hosts many events, including weddings, throughout the year. Its most significant event is the Butterfly Festival, which releases hundreds of Monarch butterflies in their Butterfly Waystation every August. The waystation is an interactive labyrinth filled with pollinator-friendly plants.

Pictured: Fall décor and annuals greet each visitor in the breezeway entrance to Colonial Gardens.

Colonial Gardens Butterfly Waystation, where they release hundreds of butterflies each August or September. Casey said, "The Butterfly Festival is our biggest single-day event of the year with approximately 2,000 people attending this year."

By December, the evergreens in the waystation become the focal point during Colonial Gardens' Christmas at Colonial: Nights of Winter Lights, where the lights are timed to music. The Nights of Winter Lights transforms the garden center into a dazzling display featuring over 500,000 lights that customers watch as they walk through the outdoor area.

These events provide affordable family-fun entertainment and bring in more people who wouldn't usually stop at the garden center to buy mums, asters, pumpkins or Christmas trees.

A Rocket Scientist Invests in a Garden Center

Colonial Gardens started in 1964 when Carl Korbel and Elizabeth Klaus partnered to create Colonial Garden Center. During their three-year tenure, the garden center was a small section where the cash registers now sit.

Stan Schmidt, an aerospace engineer, bought Colonial Garden Center along with his friend, Phil Spinelli, another engineer, in 1967. Phil sold his share of the partnership to Stan in 1969, when Stan became sole proprietor. Stan incorporated Colonial Garden Center, Inc. in 1970, selling houseplants, terrariums, produce, annuals, perennials, shrubs, bagged soils and mulch.

During the '70s, Stan grew the garden center by adding a middle barn room, a lower gift shop, a florist area and a warehouse. Stan also opened a Colonial Garden florist branch in nearby Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

Throughout the 1970s, Stan continued to add to the retail side of Colonial Gardens, including:

- Gifts
- Lawn care products
- Tools
- Chemicals
- Fresh flowers

During the 1980s, Stan expanded Colonial Garden Center to include a 3,700-sq. ft. garden house, a roofed breezeway, a renovated storefront and a paved parking lot.

Stan and his staff, including his five sons, created Pumpkinland in 1983, which children, their parents and grandparents continue to enjoy today. The Pottstown store was sold in 1984 and the Schmidts bought Haines Florist, which they moved to their Phoenixville garden center.

Pictured: Colonial Gardens sells tickets for daytime and nighttime hayrides pulled with vintage 1950 tractors. Eric Schmidt said the garden center sold 10,000 tickets for hayrides in 2022. Those 10,000 sold tickets were split between the daytime hayrides, Haunted Hayrides and Children's Night hayrides in September and October 2022.



The garden center continued to grow with more events at Halloween, an expansion of their second garden house and the addition of landscape design services.

Casey Schmidt Ahl, Stan's granddaughter, and her father, Eric, the current owner, showed me around Colonial Gardens, where their events happen, the garden center and the plants they sell.

Colonial Gardens Stays Open All Year Round

Casey said the employees are creative and provide all the artwork for Pumpkinland and the other event areas. The Schmidts keep their staff employed throughout the year, planning for the following spring season in January and February.



The garden center's events keep them in the black instead of having to draw from the previous spring's profits to pay for year-round staff. Eric said Colonial Gardens is only closed three days yearly: Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's Day.

Pictured: Christmas at Colonial: Night of Winter Lights has the highest attendance of their special event nights, with over 8,000 people spread out over the days that the Night of Winter Lights were opened in 2021. The attendance number dropped slightly in 2022 due to inclement weather. The

Bridal Allee at the event provides a magical place when the trees are lit up in white lights. Instead of Santa, you may think of Cinderella at the ball.

Along with the spring offerings, Casey bought over 40 varieties of peppers and over 50 varieties of tomatoes in the spring. This summer, they stocked approximately 500 tree varieties, 18 crape myrtle varieties and 30 hydrangea varieties. Eric also sells various fall plants, such as ornamental kale and mums. Their plant stock is locally grown and sourced.

Colonial Gardens loves diversity in their plant selections, so their customers don't want to go anywhere else, including big box retailers, for their plants. Eric wants Colonial Gardens to be his customers' one-stop shop between their events, gift shop, fresh flowers and plant selection.

Colonial Gardens has become a destination spot for families with their seasonal events. It all started with a rocket scientist and three generations of Schmidts to make it one of the premier garden centers in the Philadelphia suburbs. **GP**

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